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Goodlatte's AG Act advances from Judiciary Committee

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Rep. Bob Goodlatte's Agricultural Guestworker Act today passed the House Judiciary Committee by a one-vote margin, 17-16.

The bill, H.R. 4092, creates a new agricultural guestworker program, the H-2C guestworker program, which is designed to cover year-round employers, including dairies, food processors and aquaculture operations. Further the AG Act, as Goodlatte's measure is known, allows experienced unauthorized agricultural workers to join the H-2C program and provides more flexibility to American farmers with respect to housing, transportation, and touchback periods.

"Although no other country in the world rivals America's agriculture industry, our nation's farmers face many obstacles in today's global economy," said Goodlatte, R-Virginia. "One challenge in particular is access to a stable and reliable workforce when not enough American workers can be found to fill jobs. The current agricultural guestworker program is unworkable for farmers, buries them in red tape and excessive costs, and must be replaced. I look forward to continue working with members of Congress on this bill so that farmers can continue growing our food and our economy with the assurance that their labor needs will be met."

House Agriculture Committee Chairman K. Michael Conaway, R-Texas, signaled he's willing to help Goodlatte shepherd the legislation through the House.

"It's time for an ag worker program that both respects our nation's immigration laws and keeps American agriculture competitive," Conaway said in a statement. "As a former chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, Mr. Goodlatte understands the challenges facing farmers and ranchers. His bill cuts red tape and institutes a flexible program that accounts for the different labor needs of various producers – be it the ongoing needs of a dairy operation or the seasonal needs of specialty crop farmers."

The National Milk Producers Federation said it supports the guestworker program.

Although not ideal, the AG Act "helps advance our efforts to assure a stable, dependable and legal workforce for America's dairy farmers, now and in the future," said Jim Mulhern, president and CEO of NMPF. "The AG Act is the first step in a long process of establishing a workable solution for dairy farmers' labor needs. It recognizes that we must improve on the current system by pursuing a new approach to matching the supply and demand for workers in U.S. agriculture."

Goodlatte's bill would replace the existing H-2A temporary visa program, which dairy farmers largely cannot use because their labor needs are year-round, not seasonal. In addition to

establishing the new visa for future farm workers, it would allow currently undocumented farm workers to apply for H-2C visas so that they can participate legally in the agricultural workforce.

While the version of the legislation marked up in committee requires further improvements, Mulhern said that overall, the AG Act bill “merits the support of America’s farming community, and its refinement and passage must be a priority for congressional leaders.”

George Rohrer, a dairy farmer in Dayton, Va., and a member of the NMPF Board of Directors, said that farmers “have waited for years for lawmakers to fix our broken immigration system. The AG Act is evidence that Congressman Goodlatte has listened to many of our concerns, and is willing to try a new approach to the problem. As a farmer, it’s difficult to plan for tomorrow when you don’t know whether you’ll be able to hire qualified people today.”

Related content:

The AG Act allows a minimum of 500,000 workers for farms and related employers and streamlines regulations for hiring them. The Ag Act also allows some unauthorized immigrants to participate in the program. – Cato Institute